

Islam and Christian Spheres: Interaction and Exchange of Religious Orders

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Abstract:

As a Western society, we have the tendency to reflect and study our own struggles, victories, changes, and innovations -leaving our academic realms of Western and Eastern cultures polarized and the lenses of history biased. Nonetheless, architecture of the Medieval Ages presents actual evidence and traces of cross-interaction between the two spheres of Europe. The Crusades are frequently highlighted as a point of overlap as well as conflict between Islam and Christianity. Thus there is a habit to categorize history, meaning the timelines and their respective cultures are divided into their own "realms" of time. As a result, they seemingly cannot touch or interact except in forms of violence. This is simply not true, for in the case of Islam and Christianity the cultures were interacting and exchanging ideas. Despite their immediate differences, both Christianity and Islam stem from classical roots in architecture, and often utilize trends from each other. Their architecture provides visual dialog and societal markers of wealth and community. Available on hand are various documentations debating and commenting on these discords between Christianity and Islam. This study will also utilize documents written by the chroniclers from the time period, such as the *Chronicles of Fredgar*. Furthermore, the architecture speaks to shared purposes and techniques; for example, the Islamic Dome of the Rock and Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre are siblings in the Holy Land of Jerusalem. In previous studies Islam and Christianity have been analyzed together, yet from different perspectives and predispositions. This paper actively demonstrates the interchanging relation and gives equal status to Islam and Christianity.

Keywords: Islam, Christianity, Architecture

1. Introduction

As a Western society, we tend to reflect on and study our own struggles, victories, changes, and innovations. This paper explains Islam and Christianity comparatively as cultural and religious identities through architecture. In attempting to balance the complexity of the cultures and contemporary polarization of East and West, I investigate and discuss both parties. While acknowledging that dialog should not flow simply between the difference and similarities, this study begins with the historical origins into evolution of a culture.

By looking at the architecture of the Medieval period evidence exists that shows the influence and exchanges between Islam and Christianity. As a basis of comparison, architecture, such as the cathedral and mosque, plays a significant role in representing the identity of the leaders or patrons of the time. The practice of faith produces ideas that can be the roots to societal ideals, rules, and values. The believer gains an awareness that revolves and reacts to people and events in the community.

After the covenant between God and Abraham, three monotheistic sister religions were formed at different eras: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Judaism, the eldest of the three, was created around 450 B.C.E as descendants of Abraham and followed the word of God and the Torah. In 35 C.E., following the crucifixion of Jesus, Christianity was spread through evangelism. This religion would adopt the first five books of the Torah into the Old Testament amongst forty-one other books, in addition to the New Testament. At the core, Christians' belief revolves around the certainty that Jesus is the savior and the Son of God. Roughly six hundred years later, Muhammad founded Islam in

the year 622 C.E in Mecca. The primary spiritual text of Islam is the Qu'ran, which does not borrow from either previous text.

The ideology of religion functions on an abstract basis that stems from the annunciation of faith. At face value, the two religions appear to have difference in core elements of their faith, for example, Islam's values the teachings of the Qu'ran, their prophet, and rituals. There are these kinds of contrasts, but what about the similarities? Both faiths preach against violence and to not live purely in a material world. These teachings and morals allow religion to be a facet of a given culture. Islam and Christianity then developed into a defining trait of a society's identity.

This concept of faith itself remains a puzzling, complicated element of human culture that philosophers, historians, and preachers all work to encapsulate. Beyond simply experience, there are various methods of accomplishing the representation of faith on a physical plane. Visual cues and representation hold merit, such as collection of paintings, writings, and architecture.

Often the term "Medieval" conjures images of cathedrals, monarchy, the Black Death, and the Crusades. Out of this list, most notable is the Crusades which highlights the religious and political conflict that is romanticized in contemporary humanity. As a result, the relation between Islam and Christianity appear mainly in settings of war and disagreement. In contrast, as this paper suggests, Islam and Christianity were interacting before and outside the realms of war. Through different paths, respectively, both religions became powerful religions of the Medieval period. One of the results is that patrons commissioned spiritual sites for their communities that produced some of the finest cathedrals and mosques of Europe and Middle East.

2. Divine Structures

Buildings have been a long established role in society as both a functional and symbolic space. Contemporarily, religion is argued to be a quality of the individual as opposed to the more communal, daily role it had in during the Medieval Period. The importance of religion during this era transpired into a need to express devotion, and show the greatness of God. This stated need allowed architecture for spiritual intent to be a space for praise and people to be present with their God. With the funding from patrons, who were often royal rulers, these structures were constructed, but not without a hint of political agenda and/or spiritual aspirations into details of the design. These structures become a quality of the religious identity of the people, and in turn their culture. This makes the architecture markers of the era as time passes, and cultures evolve.

One of the principles of architecture is to communicate a visual dialog and purpose through large-scale design with subtle details that appeal to the subconscious. Above the heads of the viewer arches bloom and lace together curving down into columns that stand in confident support, at times adding to the ethereal air. A collection of well-placed stones and glass turns the space into a realm of faith and sanctuary. Under direction of the patrons and design of the architects, the edifice can "bring the unknowable into the realm of historic fact."¹

However, there was an artisan's element that shows through designs and decorative elements, and express the faith of the community. These architects develop and recycle architectural designs, and local materials into the three-dimensional compositions. So, the architecture of the Medieval Period was not built blindly, but intentional thought was given to the designs. There are some two-dimensional drawings illustrating the thought put into the pieces themselves.² While the transition from two-dimensional to three-dimensional constructions may result in some components being overlooked, or changed, the craftsmanship remains firm and successful in accomplishing the spiritual goal. Additionally, these drawings demonstrated that medieval architects had a grasp of practical math, and the potential of ideas and trends being exchanged between cities, even countries. With that said, both Islamic and Christian buildings used arches, vaulting, columns, and domes for structural integrity as well as distinguishing features within their architectural spaces. This can be seen in each of the piece of architecture this paper studies. For example, the Dome of the Rock incorporates a central octagonal floor plan with rounded arches supporting the melon dome. We see this design re-used in the Palace Chapel of Charlemagne as present in its own use of the central octagonal floor plan, and rounded arches beneath the dome.

On the surface, Islamic mosques and Christian cathedrals are drastically different, and yet they retain similar roots and influence the other throughout the Medieval Period. When the Islamic empire was first developing, notably during the Umayyad caliphate, the Islamic patrons looked to their northern neighbors for inspiration: the Byzantines. These imperial emperors of Byzantium represented success because of how long the empire had lasted, and the amount of territories in which they ruled. The caliphs for a time hired Byzantine architects and craftsmen to assist in construction and making the decorative elements, such as tile work and mosaics. This inspiration and importation of ideas essentially became a part of Islam as the style and culture grew with its own innovations.³ Turning the scope to Byzantium, the Byzantine style reflected Roman characteristics that they adopted and then pioneered, such as the

Basilica of San Vitale and Hagias Sophia. Likewise, the tradition of adaption would come full circle since Islam would later impact Christian architecture, primarily Western Christians in the use of pointed arches. These influences and ideas along with the individual Christian and Islamic architectural traits embodied the Mediterranean heritage.

Islam and Christianity influenced the other, while retaining a unique essence. The architectural frames itself can show a fair degree of resilience even after embellishment, or reconstructed.⁴ This allows the buildings to retain most of their roots of origin and can be taken for granted by the society it exists in. Looking at the Cathedral of Seville in Spain the floor plans model that of mosque, while the exterior appears as cathedral. Given this visual evidence, a building holds more influence and insight into a culture than a painting or sculpture might. Subsequently, the edifices operate as both a reliquary and a relic.⁵ This is all in addition to the architectures ability to uphold a level of representation and responsibility of transmuting faith to fact. These structures are also not only houses of the faith, but additionally are structures of social and political dynamics.⁶ Many buildings of the Medieval Period have gone through the some degree of change, as seen with cathedrals being repurposed into mosques, and the ground work of a mosque being converted into a cathedral. By means of reconstruction, or repurposing, we are presented with a literally giving and taking of ideas.

Typically when researching and studying a building of religious intent there are three parts to viewing and processing the purpose and design of the structure. Part one is the physical, and visual design. This part contains the over the top factor and more technical content. The viewer takes in the sight of the columns, arches, and orientation of the space. Part two is the message. The message encompasses the religious dogma through the presentation and visual claims of the patron and artist(s). For example, when entering a cathedral the nave leads to the main point of attention, the altar. This central space residing in the transept is decorated with images of Christ upon the cross with the holy host. A scene such as this is a reminder of the faith, and the acts Jesus took to save humanity. Variously, a mosque is focused primarily on the prayer halls that face toward the *qibla*. The *qibla* faces toward Mecca and the Ka'ba, a holy relic, as a reminder to Islam's origins and a central place of prayer. Lastly, part three is the political agenda. This looks at who paid for it, and what subtle message does their choice of location, material, and design express.

In general, what ends up transpiring, is the leader conquers the area, and with the succession of power they take steps to transform the region into their particular culture. In the case of Medieval Period one of the ways of establishing a society and proclaiming power was the construction of religious centers. To reiterate, religion during this time was a huge trait of the community, in addition to going hand-in-hand with the political powers that be. Due to the nature of only seeing the final product, when studying architecture, the observer receives very little input or evidence to the process, notion of cost, time spent, and energy outlaid, not to mention the subtle (and not-so-subtle) political intentions of the structures. If a structure was already present there are two courses of action that might have happened in the proclamation of power. The first being to destroy the current building and reconstruct over the site, like seen in Spain. Some scholars theorize that the destruction of a site was not always initially the plan, but could have been due to architectural integrity giving out. Second option is to repurpose the site after purifying and remodeling the building to a degree.⁷

By appropriating a site instead of destroying it, the act spoke more like political jargon showing the greatness of the conquest, and superiority of their religion over the other.⁸ This is perceived mostly by the visual cues that changed, or was adopted into the structure, such as the covering or adding of icons, the reorientation of the space, or structural additions within or to expand the original grounds. For example, the Great Mosque of Damascus, one of the earliest mosques of the Islamic Empire established during the Umayyad period, was originally the Basilica of John the Baptist. The caliph at time incorporated the floor plan of a cathedral, but reoriented the space and added a courtyard to model after the house of the prophet. On the other hand, in Cordoba, Spain the construction of Cathedral of Cordoba is built directly in the middle of the great mosque, which produces a unique visual contrast to the space entirely. Acts of reconstruction and construction become glorified, authorized, and part of a ritual of exchange that in turn enriches Islam and Christian societies.

In addition to the political purpose and jargon that these old designs and buildings communicated, they also had a religious context to convey: absolute faithfulness and connection between Heaven and Earth. The spiritual spaces of the Medieval Period are casted into this role of reflecting the kingdom of God; that is, striving to be heaven on Earth.⁹ Under these demands the edifices emerge as "affective spaces" of divine engagement with performativity and aesthetic qualities.¹⁰ Structures, in turn, serve a function that allows them to be more likely preserved, despite the changes of time. The important qualities of the structure resided more over the liturgy and symbolism than the architectural theory of the entire building.¹¹ The buildings are constants, but also as transformative pieces, and thus become a "living" space.

The styles and needs required for each structure varied globally, and within the particular sections of cultures. For instance, two distinct Western Christian styles of churches are those of the Cluniacs and Cistercians.¹² The Cluniacs favored decorative qualities to their structures and the usage of icons. On the contrary, Cistercians preferred simple

structures with no icons. To a degree, this iconoclastic preference made the Cistercians distantly similar to an Islamic approach. Eventually, this simple style of the Cistercians would be one of the basic ideas for the Gothic style since it introduces the concept of utilizing space to generate an impactful setting. Although icons were still an element of Gothic, the architects were pushing the limits and were more aware of the effects of a physical space. Furthermore, we see a difference between Western European Christians and Byzantine Orthodox Christians, despite having similar roots and faith. Western European Christian architecture follows a cross plan with predominately Gothic features; while Byzantine Orthodox adheres to a central, or basilica plan with more of arabesque elements.

Islam is divided into two sects within the same religion sunni and shi'ites; however, the internal stylistic differences arose from the various family in position of power, such as the Umayyad, Abbasids, or Fatimids. This means that Islamic structures changed depending on the association to each dynasty of caliphates that "coincide with the bounds of the faith."¹³ The Umayyad caliphate presented a more lavished style by using vegetal designs, imported tile work, and grand presentation of space. This is seen in structures like the Great Mosque of Damascus, Dome of the Rock, and the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Divergently, the Abbasids incorporated more natural stones, the minaret, and the locally constructed mosque. In either case of Christianity or Islam, the sects are subtly different from outside, but it is enough to produce variety styles for the same message: devotion of faith. Despite the differences, there were similarities, like how both Christian and Islam utilized certain floor plans that would become the basis for many of the religious structures. Such as, the hypostyle and house of the Prophet as the main model of the mosques, and the cross shape for that of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals.

Eventually, Islam and Christianity, as practices of faith, would assume the role of imperial religions of the developing cultures in the Western Hemisphere. The relation between religion and a political force as its own study can be quite fascinating. In theory, a connection can be drawn from the religious order's ethics and goals to an imperial ruler's establishment of ethics and laws. Historically, we can go as far back as Hammurabi's code to find one of the first written documentation of laws for a society, and then even the Egyptians for evidence of religion validating a ruler's power. However, seeing as this paper primarily focused in the Medieval Period the connection between societal laws and religious values is drawn from this natural ability of religious orders to generate a degree of self and community values that the ruler then includes, or relies upon, to validate their monarchy's function.

According to Shalom Schwartz, each religion grows and corresponds with three pairs of traits that represent the goals and values of a religious group as it functions and grows. The traits are as follow: self-direction and stimulation versus conformity and tradition, universalism and benevolence versus achievement and power, and hedonism versus conformity.¹⁴ A religion, theoretically, embodies each of these pairs while striving to balance which one has more influence in relation to the people and itself. This means that religious order must have a drive and engage their followers, but also must not constantly be in a state of change and uphold a degree of stability. Keeping this concept in mind, imperial powers also follow these pairs of traits they just prioritize them differently. Regardless, both religious and imperial powers work to play on each other's strengths, creating the backbone for people to rely and live in. Architecture then manifests itself from this because it serves, or represents both and is symbol for the people.

3. Global Stance: Religion

Beginning with the time in which Christianity was granted tolerance under the rule of Constantine the monotheistic faith of Christ escaped the persecution and oppression previously endured during the Roman Empire. Additionally, the Christians were permitted some degree of rights to practice their faith. With centuries of dogma, administration, and geographical extension Christianity would steadily shift from proscribed religion to the imperial house.¹⁵ Leading into the late fourth century under the rule of Emperor Theodosius I, Christianity officially became the state religion of Rome. Under the guise of the Roman Empire, Christianity would begin to appropriate Roman architecture, and traditions accumulating some of pagan structures and designs into their own. Structures like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher would inherit the basilica floor plan as it was constructed during Constantine's rule. This practice of cultural inheritance has been occurring since the Romans with the Greeks or the Minoans and Greeks.

In early years of Islam before the time of Muhammad, the Arabs adhered to the *jahiliya*, during which they were a polytheistic faith. The period was considered a time of ignorance because it lacked of guidance of God and the word of the Qu'ran. Later when Islam was established some of the interests of the *jahiliya*, such as astronomy, would be absorbed into the interests and studies of the monotheistic religion. Prior to the formation of the Islamic Empire, the Arabian nations were formed out of buffer states established by Byzantine and Persian rulers. The rulers would then appoint Arab vassals to look over the lands and ensure their commercial relations. This early connection between the Western emperors and pre-Islamic Empire state would have a heavy influence on the militaristic strategies and fortification that Muhammad and later caliphs utilized. Their founder and prophet, Muhammad would come forth

preaching the word of God, and leading a quest to spread the word. The Qur'an comprised the written word of Allah, or God, that would grant spiritual peace and guidance, and established the morals and ethics of the growing empire. Additionally, the Islam believes itself to be the "divine revelation." In other words, Christianity and Judaism are not false, but were lacking the proper guidance. Islam acknowledges both Christianity and Judaism as "people of the book," who must be protected, and focus on the commonality they may share.¹⁶ This maneuver played into one of Islam's core values: the formation and unity of community, the *umma*. Plus the *umma* would almost intuitively be more a collection of diverse groups of people, and often-included Christians, due to the nature of conquest. This assimilation into society would benefit the empire by increasing cultural sophistication and economic prosperity.

The political and military conquest Muhammad would begin would permit two qualities of Islam. One, Islam would steadily become a rival and equal to the Christian monarchy, as seen in Byzantine, the Crusades, and Spain. Secondly, this established the heavy interlink between Islam's religious and politico-militaristic force.¹⁷ Muhammad, and later caliphs, were very skilled in militaristic, political maneuvering with the goal to unify the people of Islam, and spreading the faith. Therefore, with centuries of dogma, administration, and geographical extension of their own Islam would grow into an empire spread as far west as Spain and into the Far East as India and Asia.¹⁸

It would not be until the mid-eleventh century that the church of the Latin West was able to give much consideration to Islam as a rival power.¹⁹ The church found itself more in a condition of "self-realization and self-definition", and concerned over local matters or threats closer to home. Islam was considered to be "the Other" by most Christians.²⁰ The title implied a lack of religious awareness, or concern, to the other faith. Although, Islam was not always seen as a religious revival, the growing empire did have commercial and politico-military influence.²¹ What's more is the European observers were not struck by the religious identity of Islam as much as their tactics on the battlefield and in political spheres. The *Chronicles of Fredgar*, one of the remaining documentations of Islamic and Christian, archive the interaction between the two cultures from both Islamic and Christian narrators.²² For example, the *Chronicle 754* details the Muslims military campaign into Southern Europe in which the Christian natives assisted the Islamic rulers in taking the city. Other forms of evidence can be found in *Account ad 638*, *Chronicle 640*, *Khuzistan Chronicles*, or *Letters* from Arthanasius.²³ All of which showed the political and militaristic exchange between the two faiths.

Even with acknowledgement in the differences of faiths, there was a level of tolerance granted under either Islamic or Christian rule. For example, most Islamic caliphs allowed Christians to practice their faith within their state, as long as they paid a poll tax, *jizya*, and did not build their own religious structures, unless granted explicit permission by the caliphate. Through the process of paying a tax and being *dhimma*, Christians and Jews alike were "granted an acknowledged position in the state."²⁴ Many Christians were still loyal to the state because it was their home, and not being mistreated was an added incentive. To a degree it implies, that although religion stands as a key factor in a society, it is not necessarily the dominating factor to hold the people of the society interact with one another.

On the other hand, Roger I, a Norman king, who conquered and ruled Sicily and Southern Italy, presents an example of a tolerant Christian ruler. After the conquest, Roger I reached an understanding with the Muslims establishing guidelines similar to the Byzantine Greeks. These guidelines granted not only tolerance, but permitted Muslim citizens a chance to serve in military, religious, and public administration. Thus, Muslims were granted religious freedom like the Christians were under the caliphate's rule. Note that the Orthodox Christians in the Byzantine sphere interacted with Muslims more often, and prior to the Western European Christians. This was commonly done through trade with the occasional conflict over the centuries, like pilgrimages, missions, warfare, and so forth.²⁵ This made the Eastern Christians more tolerant to the Muslims than their Western counterparts. Regardless of which party was ruling or whether the Muslims or Christians were the minority, there was a push and pull between progress or setbacks. These interactions made people the natural conduit for architectural ideas to travel.

4. Beginning: Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher

Within Jerusalem upon the Temple Mount stands a shimmering gold dome that glints in the sunlight ([Figure. 1](#)). It crowns an octagonal base rich with blue, green, and cream gold tiles designed over its surface ([Figure. 2](#)). When caliph Abd Al-Malik of the Umayyad dynasty commissioned it, the caliph wished for the Dome to become the central point of all religions, and to replace the Kaaba residing in Mecca.²⁶ This did not come to pass, regardless the Dome did stand as a jewel within the holy city of Jerusalem, "where history, ritual, and loca sancta-holy sites merge."²⁷

The outer tiles are lavishly decorated with geometric designs generating a visual unity throughout the whole outer surface ([Figure.3](#)). These rich blue hues distinctly contrast the cream stone of the base that divides the structure in half. The exterior becomes grounded to the physical plane of the location, while the bottom connects the structure to the earth and a reminder of the mortal realm; the upper half exalts the structure and is a reminder of the heavens. Upon a closer inspection the tile work creates a unique rhythm to the surface, which further produces a strong display of

devotion. The low-relief arches create an element of depth with small windows allowing for natural lighting to come into the interior, while around the upper rim of the walls set in deep set blue in pale white Kufic script various passages of the Qur'an.²⁸ In regards to the structure itself, the Dome of the Rock does use Islamic themes and symbolism, but also utilizes Byzantine styles. This is evident in the tile work and the mosaics on the interior arches and walls. On the outside as well as inside are columns with Roman capitals, marble revetments, metal covering of the tie beams, and mosaics along the surfaces on the interior.²⁹ These Corinthian capitals uniquely distributing the arabesque elements of the geometric patterning on the outside and the vegetal mosaics on the interior.

There is a symmetrical awareness to these designs even as they lace the upper regions of the dome. The interior is rich with earthy hues such as, reds, golden yellows, greens, and creamy whites. Upon the spandrels are more designs of the vegetal imagery. The eye follows the cylinder drum of the columns up into the suspended dome above. The inner coloring of the dome is gold, much like its outer cast, with red accents shaping the oval patterns on the curved surface (Figure.4). In a sense, this is the early trend of the core of the dome meant to mirror the stars and heaven abstractly. Smaller engaged arches line the base of the dome forming smaller windows that allow some natural lighting to leak into the space. The lighting within the space is restricted to the screened windows on the outer walls of the structure, and the upper arched windows above. As a result the colors are darkened in tone, but a certain spiritual ambiance is produced.

The Dome of the Rock's roots are Islamic with the assistance of Byzantine craftsmen suggesting an exchange of techniques. It was not uncommon for the early Islamic rulers of the Umayyad caliphate to commission Byzantine craftsmen to decorate their mosque or holy structures. From a political standpoint, the Dome of the Rock placed Islam as a fellow power to Byzantine, and set the trends that would be adopted into the Islamic culture. Structures, like the Dome of the Rock, became markers to this dedication and devout faith of the people.

Looking at the layout of the structure alludes to another point of interaction between Christians and Muslims. The floor plan (Figure. 5) shows the octagonal base with the double ambulatories. This walkway allowed theoretically traffic to flow through the sacred space smoothly with the inner ring granting access to the stone, and the outer ring permitting a passage around. Within the inner circle of the structure resides the Holy Rock that recalls narrative stories important to all three religions of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For Jews and Christians, it is the rock on which Abraham was to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in the name of the Lord, before an angelic messenger halted him. For Islam, the sacred rock marks the spot in which Muhammad made *al-isra*.³⁰ This central plan was adopted from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher because the church was originally built before the Dome, and its Anastasia Rotunda mirrors that of the Dome's central plan. Additionally both domes are cylindrical, spanning 67 feet.³¹ This idea that the Dome of the Rock borrowed from a Christian church is a notion scholars argue. The church was previously established in the community, and as a new imperial force it can be assumed that the caliph is looking for ways to show their success. To reiterate, at this time of the Umayyads, Byzantines were the expression of success. Furthermore, in the interior the combination of arches and circular flow generates ordered repetition and rhythmic patterns. The arches are painted with monochromatic stripes alternating between black and white, while the column shafts are swirled marble. Once more the viewer is greeted with rich Byzantine mosaics covering most of, if not all, of the surface (Figure.6).

Amongst the earth tone stones of the clustered city of Jerusalem stand two blue domes of copper. One larger than the other rests behind it like the sun behind the eclipsing moon. The smooth surfaces of the standing, curving walls match that of the city. Engaged arches along with overhangs create rhythm and interest over what normally would be a plain exterior to the church. Housed within this very church rests the tomb of Jesus and his stone of annunciation before his burial. It is known as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Figure. 7).

The original grounds of the Holy Sepulcher's construction began during Constantine's rule in 326 C.E. housing the Cavalry and tomb of Christ.³² When this church was originally constructed it was called the Basilica of Constantine, due to originally following the traditional basilica of the Roman Empire (Figure. 8). Originally, during the early constructions of religious structures of Constantine's rule the buildings were based on the secular basilica. This comprised of a rectangular structure with an apse at both ends, which normally served as a court of law.³³ The church would be destroyed two different times, once by the Persians and again later by the Islamic caliphs when they reclaimed Jerusalem. In the case of the Holy Sepulchre, despite the destructive past it has endure the original layout of the rotunda and Calvary along with the choice of materials stayed the consistent. As a basilica the structure follows the themes of renewal and baptism alluding to the concepts of redemption and salvation.³⁴

Each time it was rebuilt the church retained the Anastasis Rotunda for two notable reasons: one, the focus resided on the tomb of Christ, and two, often when it was destroyed this section managed to stay. For these reasons, this paper will mainly look at this part of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It is argued that the church influenced the Dome of the Rock, and then in turn the Dome of the Rock influenced the current floor plan of the Rotunda. The rotunda is a central plan with its focus being on the tomb of Christ, and a dome hangs overhead producing the heavenly atmosphere.

The tomb of Jesus stands as a small chapel of its own within the rotunda, operating as a symbol of Jesus's death and Resurrection. Similar to the Dome of the Rock, the church has a double ring ambulatory, but at a grander scale. It also uses the octagonal base permitting the focus to reside over the tomb of Christ ([Figure.9](#)). Both of these spaces utilize the repetition of arches, Roman columns, and domes to create their holy spaces. The Roman capitals and columns throughout the interior space, located mainly in the outer rim, frame the central space. Rounded arching ascends to the bottom edge of the dome like a series of windows. Vertically, three bands creating not only depth in the space, but resting levels for the eye divide the cylindrical shape of the rotunda. Unlike the Dome of the Rock, the interior of the rotunda is not heavily decorated, but is mainly composed of earthy colored stones.

One of the most decorative points of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher's interior is the dome's ceiling. The dome has an oculus framed by thick gold rays following the curve of the surface ([Figure. 10](#)). Littered along the curving space of the dome are gold stars meant to create the illusion of heaven. Note, the connection between the stars and heaven are a symbolic trait within Islam too. The use of this astrology trend as a symbol of the heavens or God's infinite nature illustrates the previous point of ideas being communicated across the cultures. The circular patterns with small details being like heavenly bodies arranged and collected above. The space becomes sublime because of all the visual information.

5. Developing: Palace Chapel of Charlemagne and the Great Mosque of Kairouan

Moving to Western Europe, the architectural style of Christianity has shifted, and still holds similar designs to the structures of the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Looking at the Palace Chapel of Charlemagne this becomes evident, in particular the floor plan ([Figure.11](#)). Located in Aachen, Germany the structure's placement within the city permits the chapel to hold a dominating presence. Commissioned by Emperor Charlemagne between 793 and 813 C.E, the original chapel stands as a small part of the contemporary structure currently. Emperor Charlemagne built the chapel as a statement to his power, but more for the unification of the West under his rule.

The palace chapel is a central plan with a double ambulatory with a octagonal center ring and an outer sixteen-sided ring. The number eight is a holy number for both Islam and Christianity, for it stands for the eight gardens of Islam and rebirth and infinity of God for both Christians and Muslims. Although the space is not focused around a particularly sacred item, services would have been held here bringing the community together. Gothic additions are present ([Figure.12](#)) with the original chapel marked by the ridge dome. Its general shape is cylindrical, like a tower, pushing upwards.

The interior further refers back to the Dome of the Rock as marked by the series of polychrome, rounded arches framing the center. Once more the viewer is presented with columns as a form of support, but also decoration as seen in the open spaces within the second level of archways ([Figure.13](#)). Visually, the base half of the palace chapel is weighted with strong, thick support marble columns grounding the space, which contrasts the columns' natural ability to push skywards. Where the mosque achieves elegance in space and repetition, the palace chapel's grace comes through the arches pushing upwards partnered with the surfaces decorated with primarily gold mosaics depicting icons of gospel characters. This whole space is generally decorative as seen in the patterning of surfaces, use of columns and arches, and the particular color palette.

The primary colors of the interior are mainly gold and cream hues, while the columns continue to play a role throughout in nonstructural ways by acting as engaged columns in between the large archways of the second level. Further up to the top the smaller windows continue the soft rounding of the architectural surfaces, while allowing natural lighting to filter in. The height of chapel is 103 feet high that leads to the octagonal dome, which is painted gold and presents Jesus enthroned with holy host ([Figure. 14](#)), which emphasizes the over the top element of the space. Plus, this kind of imagery would serve as a reminder, or a message, to the greatness of God, like the kufic script or geometric low-reliefs would.

A notably example of a mosque during the Umayyad caliphate was the Great Mosque of Damascus, which was previously the Basilica of John the Baptist ([Figure.15](#)). This practice of repurposing structures, and reusing local materials or importing other substances, is a trend that the Islamic Empire used. As a result, the trend adds to the structures' dynamic, and serves as evidence to the exchanging and adoption of styles and ideas between cultures.

Going forward estimately three hundred years Islam has developed as a formidable imperial power. The Umayyad had been succeeded by the Abbasid caliphate, which furthered the expansion of the empire. The Abbasid family rose to power after killing all but one of the Umayyad caliph, believing they had become to be too secular and not fit to lead the Islamic nation. Similar to the Chapel of Charlemagne, when the mosque was built it was partly done as a political maneuver when Kairouan had been conquered by the Islamic rulers of the Aghlabids, and became the capital

of “Muslim West.”³⁵ A mosque is modeled after the house of the prophet, and therefore meant to in some degree fulfill the role of a community and spiritual center. The structure of a mosque is also a hypostyle, which means a roof supported by columns that form the several prayer rows that face toward the *qibla* wall. This particular mosque has seventeen aisles leading to the *qibla* wall. The floor plan of the mosque becomes refined during the Abbasid rule with some additions, like the addition minaret. The Great Mosque of Kairouan constructed in 836 C.E. begins to show this developing style (Figure. 16). Originally founded in the seventh century, the mosque went through several renovations in the ninth century under Aghlabids guidance.

The craftsmen began to employ the distinct traits of the Islamic designs as seen with the usage of geometric decoration (both tile and low-relief) as opposed to vegetal or icons, the decorative features rely more on the framing of the space, such as the arch, and low relief carvings of geometric and arabesque. The location remains critical due to this mosque being located in the center of the city. This location establishes the theme of the *umma* and the importance of the faith. On the exterior, the Great Mosque of Kairouan appears fortress like with the visual focus over the courtyard. The outer walls are thick with engaged buttresses, and floor plan is primarily rectangular in shape with domes marked the entrance and the *mihrab* (Figure.17). The domes’ surfaces are rigid creating a textured element, and are lined with window-like openings. Unlike the later Gothic period, and more similar to the early Romanesque cathedral attempts, these buttresses are thick and attached solely to the walls. This generates a firm, secure appearance to the exterior, while the courtyard openness literally and metaphorically contrasted the perimeter facing the city. The exterior in comparison to a Christian edifice is very plain and lacks the same visual engagement the cathedral might. Framing the courtyard is a walkway with columns supporting the overhang. Around the contour of the structure are open halls for the worshippers to escape the heat of the sun, or walk around the gathering crowds on days of worship. These columns echo back to the Byzantine-Roman influence over the early structures, while also operating as a traditional trait of the mosque’s courtyard (Figure.18).

The rounded arches and columns outline the aisles within the interior. The floor is covered in carpets for prayer and have simplistic arch patterns on it. The weighted top capitals of the arches flow down into slender columns divides the space. This transition from thick bases of the arches into the capitals creates an interesting tension that plays as a visual strength. Rounded arches open the space establishing an airy sense of vastness. The ceiling is made of painted wood and the soft low relief carving along the archway surfaces. In a sense this opens up the space without having too much crowding the viewer too much (Figure.19). Where the cathedral exceeds in creating a vast, spiritual space by height, the mosque succeeds in horizontal expansion. Through the repetitive series of prayer halls pushing outward to creating this vast space for the viewer to wander in and linger in, while assisting in the framing of the focus (Figure. 20). This is where the understanding of the messages comes into play, as the mosque is an architectural marker for the community and prayer.

6. Meet in the Middle: Great Mosque of Cordoba and Cathedral of Seville

At one point in time both imperial religion, Islam and Christianity ruled in Spain. The *Chronicles of Fredegar* has record of some of the instances, such as the Islamic caliphate overthrowing the Visigoths. This Islamic caliphate would be the surviving member of the Umayyad after their explosion by the Abbasids, and would achieve power in Spain; therefore becoming known as the Umayyad of Spain. Located within the city of Cordoba and commissioned by Emir Abd al-Rahman I in 785 C.E., is the Great Mosque of Cordoba. From 771 C.E. to 1492 C.E. the Umayyads would defend and rule over Spain. There were instances during the conquest in which the Christian and Jewish citizens would assist in overthrowing the Visigoth predecessors.³⁶ Emir Abd al-Rahman I then claimed Cordoba as the new capital of the Umayyad of Spain. The inspiration for this mosque came from the architectural concepts of Christian church San Vicente, and Roman and Visigothic traces.³⁷

This mosque still abides by the hypostyle with nineteen prayer rows spanning across, and the house of the prophet as indicated by the courtyard (Figure. 21). These halls are marked by pointed roofing stack in a series next to each other, which all connect into the *qibla* wall. The outer walls are plain, almost fort-like, with columns decorating and acting similarly structurally as buttresses would. As traditionally found, the courtyard is framed rounded arches in between thick, heavy set columns for the community to walk or sit during the sunny days. It comes as no surprise that Roman columns and arches are still present within the construction of these mosque because of the inheritance and adaption calling back to the Dome of the Rock. The architectural trend continues through the centuries, and becomes just as much part of the culture as it does for Western Christians.

Additionally, a dome, an eight-sided flat angle dome, once more marks the *mihrab* as the Abbasids did before there is also a minaret present completing the key traits found in the layout of a mosque. This minaret tower composition compares similarly to the Fatimid’s tower designs that implies internal exchange of ideas between clans flowing

throughout the Islamic Empire. In terms of comparing the one to the another, the Abbasids inherit more of their Mesopotamian roots, while the Umayyads embody the Mediterranean appearance of architecture used especially in Damascus.³⁸ The floor plan of the Great Mosque of Cordoba ([Figure. 22](#)) shows the expansive size from the additions made by the caliphs following Emir Abd al-Rahman I's original construction. The exterior continues the visual trend of the Mosque of Kairouan in its simplicity and tan stone coloring, but it is the interior where the differences arise.

The composition of the space is pushed out horizontally, once more framed with the traditional repetition of arches. This time the arches are polychrome, similar to the Dome of the Rock and the Palace Chapel of Charlemagne, alternating between red and white. However, in addition to pushing out horizontally, the Great Mosque of Cordoba also extends upward with the second level of arches stacked on ([Figure. 23](#)). This creates an airy space; despite the lack of natural lighting that would have the same effect in a cathedral. Regardless, there is this uplifting quality to the space with the largely decorative elements throughout. In the Great Mosque of Cordoba there is more decorative qualities to the surfaces, especially nearing the *mihrab*. Present around the *mihrab* are polylobed arches and the double stacked arching that add a unique, and expressive quality to the area ([Figure. 24](#)). The low relief of geometric patterning and kufic script highlight the space and present the Word of God in a physical form. Furthermore, the spacious nature of the dome comes into play once more. The dome above is framed similarly to the Palace Chapel of Charlemagne with eight sides leading to a pointed roof. However, this dome produces the illusion of the heavens without the icons of Christianity, and by usage of symmetry and text. This kind of design is later adopted into the Gothic cathedrals of Western Christianity.

An element of the Great Mosque of Cordoba and the Cathedral of Seville is the imposing of one structure over another. Looking back at the floor plan and exterior of Cordoba there is a cathedral built almost directly in the middle of the mosque ([Figure. 25](#)). This Gothic cathedral was incorporated after the Christian reconquest of Spain, led by Ferdinand III, when Cordoba became the newly acquired Christian capital. As mentioned before, it was not uncommon for imperial and spiritual leaders to reclaim and repurpose their enemy's holy sites into their own after purifying it with holy water and incense. This was seen as a political show of power, and spiritual grace over their enemies. In documentation by Rodrigo Ximenez de Rada in 1236 C.E. they describe this process, but also attest to the gloriousness of the structure before the cathedral was added. In some cases this meant renovating the space without completely destroying the original foundation, spreading holy water and incense. The act of constructing the Cathedral of Cordoba into the mosque, which occurred under Charles V, was later perceived by the ruler to be a mistake. A perception that would be a heavy contrast to the cathedrals in Toledo, Granada, and Seville, which demolished the mosques and built over them.³⁹

The cathedral within the Mosque of Cordoba can be viewed from the courtyard and aerial view. Other than the obvious differences of scaling height and buttresses stemmed from the cathedral, the Christian piece of architecture resides rather seamlessly in the overall composition. In contrast to the interior, there is a stark difference between cathedral and mosque. The rounded, double stacked arches of the mosque appear to abruptly end as the white, compound columns of the Gothic style abruptly push upwards into the pointed arch ([Figure. 26](#)). Natural lighting filters in from the high stain glass windows, while the overall tone of the space changes. The vaulting high above is formed with similar geometric patterning of space around the *mihrab*. Within the altar space, the use of icons comes back into play with an almost over-embellished quality.

The Cathedral of Seville was constructed with different beginnings. The twelfth century would mark the beginning of the roots of Gothic architecture beginning in France, which have since then carried over into Spain. Looking at the floor plan of the cathedral the viewer can already see some distinct similarities ([Figure. 27](#)). It is modeled similar to the house of the prophet found in Islam with the largely rectangular space, courtyard, and a minaret-like tower; because the Cathedral of Seville is literally built over a mosque. Not all mosques, like the Great Mosque of Cordoba, could be saved and repurposed; for political or structural integrity reasons. The exterior appears more fortress-like making the cathedral less of a traditional cathedral like Notre Dame; however, it still incorporates key Gothic features. The arches and columns frame the courtyard, and these arches are more of a keel arch that had to have been brought over from the crusades ([Figure. 28](#)). Spanning from the sides are flying buttress that support the vaulting and height of the cathedral ([Figure. 29](#)). Also present is the rosary window face on the front entrance, and the pointed arching housing the lunette above the door.

On the interior the space, is elevated to the height that contemporary viewers would expect of a Gothic cathedral. Compound columns support the weight of the vaulting as it comes down, and permits the creation of more stained glass ([Figure. 30](#)). Focusing mainly on Christianity architecture, in place of the round arch comes the pointed arch in Gothic design, an architectural element introduced by Muslims own keel and pointed arch. This arching design permits the space to achieve vertical height and open the space for the viewers, a particular effect that Gothic cathedrals are noted to have.

Rib-vaulting in particular comes into play. The space is lighter and vaster by the means of height. Once more, we see the trend of pushing skyward to illustrate the grandness of God and the heavens. As opposed to the buildings previously looked at, the Cathedral of Seville does not have a particular dome, but it does follow the Western Christian orientation of the cross leading to the transept, which is marked by particularly decorated vaulting. The Christian craftsman employed the symmetrical use of geometry to decorate the surfaces of the cathedral; especially above within the vaulting. Some of the vaulting forms a star like pattern (Figure. 31) that is textured, very similarly to mosque. This lavished geometric design is also seen in the vaulting of the cathedral in the Great Mosque of Cordoba, and the *mihrab*.

As Jerusalem has been the starting point for both Islam and Christianity, Spain appears as the ideal spot to come full circle. Both the Great Mosque of Cordoba and Cathedral of Seville represent the unique, individualized styles of the Christianity and Islam, while playing into this notion of repurposing the building with the shifts of political powers that be. As a result, the structures stand a reminders and evidence to the dialog and exchange.

7. Conclusion

Over the years, we have polarized the studies of the world into two areas, West and East. This paper offers a more nuanced perspective by comparing Islamic and Christian architecture of the Medieval Period. Beginning with the early designs of the Dome of the Rock and Church of the Holy Sepulcher and continuing onto the Great Mosque of Cordoba and the Cathedral of Seville we can not only see how the two cultures and religions differ, but also how they influenced and admired each other.

The space of a cathedral and mosque were considered sacred, and the craftsmen and patrons who worked on them used visual and symbolic elements to create such a place. Some of the key architectural traits used in both Islam and Christian architecture are columns, arches, and domes. As both cultures developed, their intentional design for their sacred space would become unique, and differ in expression from each other, like the Great Mosque of Kairouan and the Palace Chapel of Charlemagne. Regardless, there is evidence, such as visual and symbolic cues, pointing back to their shared roots in Jerusalem. Till finally both cultures and religions directly cross paths with the repurposing and reconstruction of spiritual structures in Spain, like the Great Mosque of Cordoba and the Cathedral of Seville. Both forms of structures uphold qualities and designs pertaining to both Islam and Christianity.

In conclusion, the world is not divided into two halves, but is comprised of identities and cultures interacting and influencing each other. Moving forward, we must gain awareness to the connection and dialog between these identities, such as Islam and Christianity. To do this, as this paper has done, one can look at the historical evidence as found or preserved through architecture, art, and text. Additionally, one must also process the current political jargon and analyze to find the truth as opposed to the opinions. As researchers and members of our own cultures, we must walk this line of proscribing truth and supporting it with opinions and evidence. In the end, there must be a willingness to understand and see the connections.

8. Endnotes

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- 30 This translates to the mean the "Night Journey" in which Muhammad ascended to visit Allah in heaven.
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